

# The THOREAU SOCIETY BULLETIN

'Bulletin Twenty-three. April, 1948

The Thoreau Society is an informal organization of several hundred students and followers of the life and works of Henry David Thoreau. Membership is open to anyone interested. Fees are one dollar a year. This bulletin is issued occasionally, usually quarterly, by the secretary. All the material, unless otherwise assigned, is compiled and written by the secretary.

The officers of the society are Raymond Adams, Chapel Hill, N.C., president; Mrs. Caleb Wheeler, Concord, Mass., vice-president; and secretary-treasurer: Walter Harding

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## GANDHI AND THOREAU by Walter Harding

The tragic death of Gandhi by an assassin's hand in India brings to mind the Mahatma's deep respect for and admiration of Henry David Thoreau. It was in 1907, when Gandhi was in the midst of his first great passive resistance struggle in the Union of South Africa, a struggle to gain rights for the Indians who had migrated there, that a friend sent him a copy of Thoreau's essay on "Civil Disobedience." Gandhi was deeply impressed with Thoreau's philosophy from this very first reading. He translated a portion of the essay and printed it in his paper Indian Opinion. He also made copious extracts for the English part of the paper. Some years later he wrote Henry Salt, the English biographer of Thoreau: "The essay seemed to be so convincing and truthful that I felt the need of knowing more of Thoreau, and I came across your Life of him, his "Walden," and other shorter essays, all of which I read with great pleasure and equal profit."

Gandhi continued to read Thoreau throughout his life and to recommend him to his friends. It is said that Gandhi's followers reprinted the essay on "Civil Disobedience" numerous times and carried it with them as a Bible and political handbook. Each of the numerous times that Gandhi was sent to prison for his civil disobedience campaigns in India after he returned there from South Africa, he carried a copy of "Civil Disobedience" with him, both as a symbol of his resistance and as an inspiration to further work.

In 1931, Gandhi traveled to London to attend the India Round Table Conference. His companion on the train trip across France was Roger Baldwin, the chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union and a life-long admirer of Thoreau. Noticing that the only book visible in the compartment was a copy of "Civil Disobedience," Baldwin remarked that it seemed a rather extreme doctrine for a nationalist. Gandhi responded that it contained the essence of his political philosophy, not only as India's struggle related to the British, but as to his own views of the relationship of citizens to government. Later, at an interview during the conference itself, Gandhi told Webb Miller, the United Press European correspondent, that he actually took the name of his movement in India from Thoreau's essay, that until he read that essay he had never found a suitable translation for his Indian word Satyagraha.

Thoreau's name turns up again and again in Gandhi's writings and oftentimes we can find whole passages that are almost paraphrases of the Concordian's essay, such as this by Gandhi:

Writs are impossible when they are confined to a few recalcitrants. They are troublesome when they have to be executed against many high-souled persons who have done no wrong and who refuse payment to vindicate a principle. They may not attract much notice when isolated individuals resort to this method of protest. But clean examples have a curious method of multiplying themselves. They bear publicity and the sufferers instead of incurring odium receive congratulations.

Interestingly enough, Thoreau derived a great deal of his own inspiration from the writings of Gandhi's own countrymen. Thoreau's friend and neighbor Ralph Waldo Emerson first called his attention to the great classics of Hindu

and other Oriental literature shortly after Thoreau graduated from Harvard in 1837, and he read them with great devotion throughout the rest of his life. In 1855, his English friend Thomas Cholmondeley sent him forty-four volumes of Oriental writings which made him the possessor of one of the largest libraries of its kind in the New World at the time. He so steeped himself in these and similar volumes which he borrowed from Harvard Library that Lin Yutang has said that if Thoreau's writings were to be translated into an Oriental tongue, it would be almost impossible to distinguish them from the native literature there.

Time and time again in his lifetime Gandhi paid tribute to Thoreau. We know of no other who so well carried out the principles of Thoreau. Had the two men been contemporaries, we feel certain that the respect and admiration would have been amply returned. So now with the sad news of Gandhi's death, I can think of no more fitting tribute to him than the words which Thoreau spoke upon the death of John Brown:

Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light. . . . Of all the men who were said to be my contemporaries, it seemed to me that John Brown was the only one who had not died. . . . I never hear of any particularly brave and earnest man, but my first thought is of John Brown, and what relation he may be to him. I meet him at every turn. He is more alive than ever he was. He has earned immortality. He is not confined to North Elba nor to Kansas. He is no longer working in secret. He works in public, and in the clearest light that shines on this land.

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THE DAVID KALMAN "A STUDY OF THOREAU," which we printed in our January bulletin stirred up more controversy than any other article which has ever appeared in the bulletin. Supporters and opponents of the article wrote in about equal numbers. Since the article pretty well speaks for itself, I will quote only this brief excerpt from the "pro" letters: "What our critics won't see is that explanation doesn't explain away. Thoreau remains no whit less Thoreau. Now we can see around him a little more and context adds meaning."--R.M.Elliott. And from the "con" letters: "If the writer had described Thoreau in the language of science thus 'Class, Mammalia; Order, Primates; Genus, Homo; Species, Europens; Variety, Brown; Individual, Henry David,' so and so, he would at any rate have remained in the safe realm of fact. Here, however, he is giving his own opinion based on a pseudo-science."--John Davies. "Is it true that perfectionism usually bespeaks a feeling of inferiority? No person apparently ever approximates perfection; but it behooves all always to strive after moral, ethical and spiritual progress. Perhaps the author had some other meaning in mind when using that word."--Scribe. "The study of Thoreau exhibits glaringly the defects of the system presented in my book. Kalman seems to assume that the social system in which Thoreau was reared was uncriticizable and hence his rejections of it were signs of weakness and irrational irritation. On this basis, it is hardly possible to explain the hold Thoreau has had on many enlightened minds."--H.A.Murray. (Dr. Murray is the author of Explorations in Personality which expounds the system upon which Mr. Kalman's Thoreau study was based.

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THE ANNUAL MEETING of our society will be held as usual in Concord on Saturday July 10th. Plans are already under way for the meeting and a more specific announcement of the program will be sent out to all members late in June. Of late there has been frequent criticism of the fact that members who live too far from Concord to attend the annual meetings are not given a sufficient opportunity to participate in the voting and elections. I have been working on a revision of our society's by-laws to help clear up this situation and I shall present it at the annual meeting. Meanwhile if any members wish to suggest any revisions of the by-laws or to make any nominations for officers for the coming year, I will be happy to present their letters to the nominating committee or the members at the annual meeting.

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The Saturday Evening Post for February 28, 1948, contained a full-page advertisement of the Travelers Insurance Company of Hartford, Conn., entitled "The man who lived on 27 cents a week" and containing a drawing of Thoreau by R. Marsh. Through the courtesy of The Travelers we are able to enclose a copy of this advertisement with each copy of this bulletin.



In our January issue, we raised the question of Thoreau's sowing the water nut, Trapa natans, in the Sudbury River. Mrs. Herbert Hosmer has come to our rescue with the following quotation from Mabel Priscilla Cook's "Some Additions to the 'Flora of Middlesex County, Massachusetts'" in RHODORA ("The Journal of the New England Botanical Club") for May, 1899:

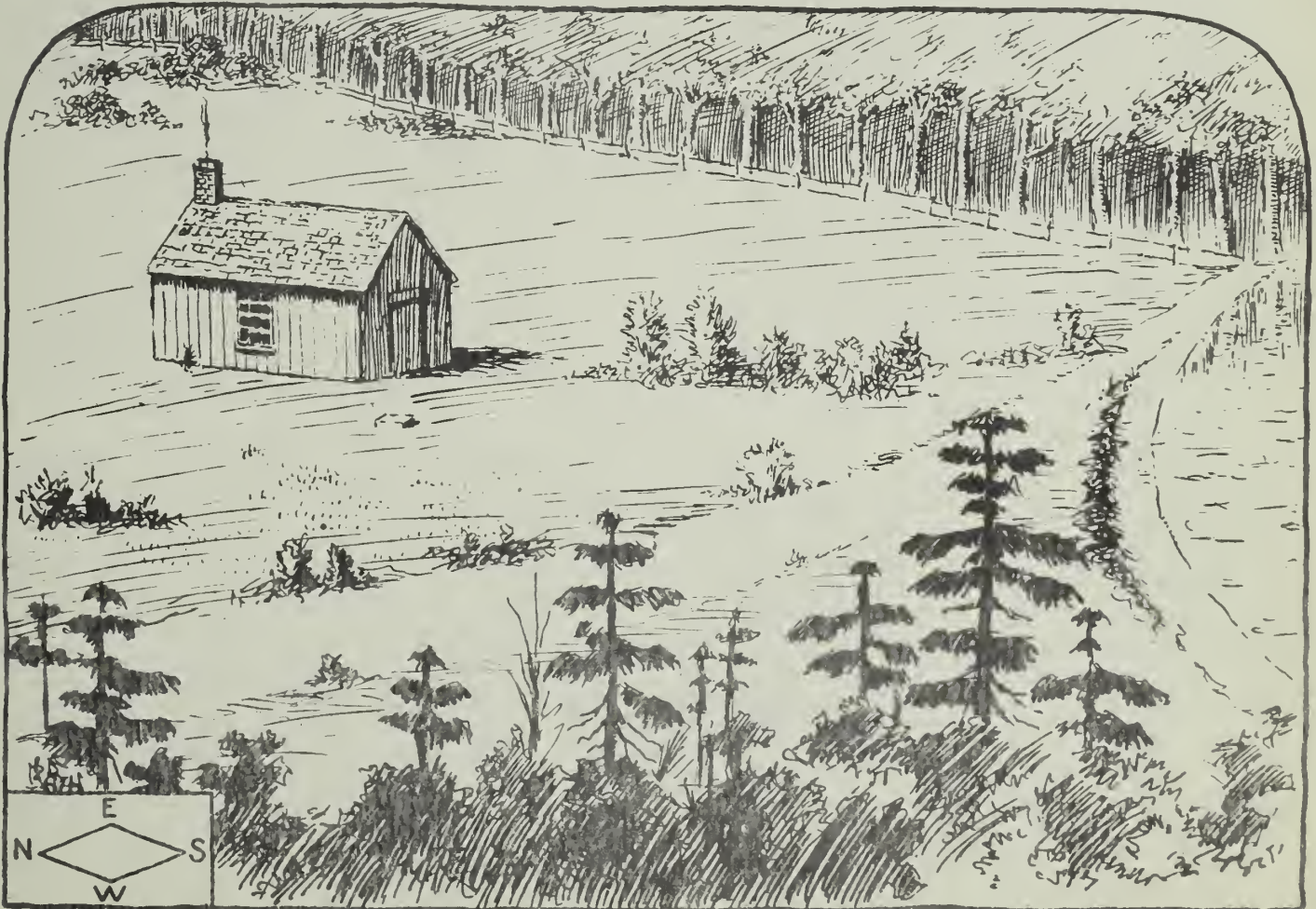
The naturalization of Trapa natans, L., in the Concord River is so complete that it has become a nuisance and has to be weeded out of the Sudbury River above its junction with the Assabet, and far above the station where it was planted by Minot Pratt. I wonder that no enterprising boy has turned it to account by gathering and selling the nuts. They are very popular with children in Austria.

Mrs. Hosmer adds that Minot Pratt introduced many plants into Concord.

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As you may recall, it was voted at the annual meeting in Concord last July to reprint the "Thoreau Annex" of the CONCORD FREEMAN as the next in our series of reprints of important pieces of Thoreauviana. This was a special supplement of one of the 1880 issues of a local Concord newspaper. It contains many personal recollections of Thoreau that have never been printed elsewhere. I have hunted high and low for a copy that is available for photostating so that we may have it reprinted. So far I have been unsuccessful. If any of our members own a copy or know the location of one and will have a positive photostat,<sup>made</sup> they will win not only my gratitude but that of all our members and they will be reimbursed from our treasury.

Meanwhile Albert E. Lownes of Providence, Rhode Island, has most graciously consented to our reproducing in this bulletin the original drawing of Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond which was used in that "Annex." When we succeed in reprinting the "Thoreau Annex," you will be able to compare the two pictures and note that the original, herewith reproduced, was evidently quite retouched before being reprinted in the "Annex." We are proud to be able to reproduce this drawing as it originally appeared.





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Mrs. Eddie W. Wilson writes that R.P.T. Coffin's *YANKEE COAST* (New York: Macmillan, 1947) has references to Thoreau as a hermit on Pages 209-10.

Clayton Hoagland writes that the Feb. *GOOD HOUSEKEEPING* has two pages of quotations led off by one from Thoreau. He adds that Macmillan will publish in May a novel entitled *WALDEN TWO* by B.F. Skinner about a modern Utopia.

A recent letter from Houghton Mifflin Company states, "We have no plans for reprinting Thoreau's *JOURNALS*. Although there is a demand for the books it is so small it does not warrant our manufacturing this item." This will be a keen disappointment to those many who have hoped that Thoreau's *JOURNALS* would once again be on the bookstalls after forty years' absence. Perhaps if a sufficient number of our members would write Houghton Mifflin (2 Park Street, Boston, Mass.), we could change their mind as to the demand. I do know that all book-dealers state categorically that they find a continued demand for Thoreau's books and particularly his *JOURNALS* which they cannot supply.

Albert E. Lownes raises the question, Did Thoreau and Audubon, the naturalist, ever meet? He says that while he cannot find a specific reference to any visit to Concord by Audubon, there are records of numerous visits to Boston and Moncure Conway records a visit with Mrs. Ripley. "Since he was always looking for naturalists who could give him information, it seems inconceivable that he would not be directed to Thoreau." Can anyone find any further information?

Roland Robbins writes that he has been successful in removing the offending s from the word upwards on the stone marking the site of Thoreau's cabin. He also reports that the nine granite posts have been set up to mark the cornerposts of the cabin and shed and have been connected with iron chains with an opening where the doorway stood so that one may enter to read the inscription on the stone. Thus, at last, the memorial is complete.

"I wish so to live ever as to derive my satisfactions and inspirations from the commonest events, every-day phenomena, so that what my senses hourly perceive, my daily walk, the conversation of my neighbors, may inspire me, and I may dream of no heaven but that which lies about me."--Thoreau's *JOURNALS*.